DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 361 446 UD 029 457

AUTHOR Siu, Sau-Fong
TITLE Taking No Chances: Profile of a Chinese-American Family's Support for School Success.
INSTITUTION Center on Families, Communities, Schools, and Children's Learning.; Wheelock Coll., Boston, Mass.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE Apr 93
CONTRACT R117Q00031
NOTE 24p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Atlanta, GA, April 12-16, 1993).
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Academic Achievement; Acculturation; Case Studies; *Child Rearing; *Chinese Americans; Cultural Differences; Elementary School Students; Family Characteristics; Immigrants; Parent Child Relationship; *Parent Participation; Parent Role; Primary Education; Profiles; *Social Adjustment; *Student Adjustment

ABSTRACT

The case study of how one Chinese-American family enhances the school success of their children is presented. The study is part of a 5-year project on how families from different ethnic backgrounds promote academic achievement. Information has been collected on nine Chinese-American families, but only one is the focus of this report. Information on the family was gathered through a background questionnaire, open-ended interviews, and observation of parent-child interactions. The working class immigrant Chinese-American subject family has only one child, and has managed to socialize their first-grade son to be sociable, talkative, and curious, as well as compliant, attentive, and polite. The ways the family has accomplished this, while exposing the child to a Chinese environment and an English-speaking environment, are explored. Hypotheses generated from the analysis of data from this family and the other families will eventually be tested with a larger Chinese-American population. (Contains 31 references.) (SLD)

**********
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
**********

CENTER ON FAMILIES,
COMMUNITIES, SCHOOLS
& CHILDREN'S LEARNING

Wheelock College 45 Pilgrim Road Boston, MA 02215 617-734-5200

ED 361 446

# TAKING NO CHANCES: PROFILE OF A CHINESE-AMERICAN FAMILY'S SUPPORT FOR SCHOOL SUCCESS

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Sau-Fong Siu, D.S.W.

Wheelock College, Boston

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

S. Fong Siu
Wheelock College

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Atlanta, Georgia, April 12, 1993.

The study was supported by the U.S. Department of Education Office of Educational Research and Improvement (R117Q 00031) in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The opinions expressed in this paper are the author's own and do not represent OERI or HHS position on policies.

UD 029457

Boston University, School of Education, 605 Commonwealth Avenue, Boston, MA 02215, 617-353-3309
Institute for Responsive Education, 605 Commonwealth Avenue, Boston, MA 02215, 617-353-3309
The Johns Hopkins University, 3505 North Charles Street, Baltimore, MD 21218, 301-338-7570
The University of Illinois, 210 Education Building, 1310 S. Sixth Street, Champaign, IL 61820, 217-333-2245
Wheelock College, 45 Pilgrim Road, Boston, MA 02215, 617-734-5200
Yale University, P.O. Box 11A Yale Station, New Haven, CT 06520, 203-432-4577

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

# TAKING NO CHANCES: PROFILE OF A CHINESE-AMERICAN FAMILY'S SUPPORT FOR SCHOOL SUCCESS

**Sau-Fong Siu**

## Introduction

Research has repeatedly demonstrated the positive connection between parent support and involvement and children's school achievement (e.g. Epstein, 1987; Dornbusch & Wood, 1989; Davies, 1990; Swap, 1993). Family support and involvement come in various forms, including articulating expectations, creating a stress-free home environment, engaging in literacy activities, and establishing positive relationships with the school.

This paper will present partial results from the first phase of a five-year project on how families from four different backgrounds (African-American, Chinese-American, Irish-American, and Puerto Rican) enhance their young children's school success. The research design calls for the use of ethnographic methods (participant observation and in-depth interviews) to study ten families from each cultural group and from various income levels. The researchers share the same ethnic heritage as the research families.

Prior to data collection, a thorough literature review was conducted by each researcher on the topic of educational achievement for that group (Hidalgo, 1992; Perry, 1993; Siu, 1992; Swap & Krasnow, 1992). The review on Chinese-Americans' educational achievement draws upon empirical research studies, statistical data, historical accounts, fiction, biographies, autobiographies, and newspaper stories (Siu, 1992).

To date, nine Chinese-American families have been recruited for the project. Although raw data exists for all nine families, not all of it has been analyzed. Therefore, this paper will focus on only one family and will identify patterns and themes which emerged from the first year of data collection.

A caveat is in order. Though aware of the many factors and forces which influence school achievement, the researchers have chosen to limit their focus to family practices and values within a community context. The intent is to more fully understand the process of family and community support; it is not to negate the importance of other variables such as the school policy or teacher quality.

## Historical and Theoretical Context

Knowing the history of Chinese immigrants in America is critical to understanding the context of family values and practices with regard to education. How an ethnic group once considered to be uneducable heathen is now touted as a model minority is a fascinating story (Siu, 1992).

The first Chinese arrived in the United States about 150 years ago. Despite more than a century of severe discrimination in immigration, employment, housing, education, citizenship, marriage, and social life, Chinese-Americans as a group have taken advantage of educational and career opportunities that opened up after the Second World War. With changes in the immigration law in 1965 favoring the professionally trained, the educational profile of Chinese-Americans has been transformed.

Since the 1970's, Chinese-Americans have been perceived by the American public as superachievers or math whiz kids. On a number of commonly-accepted indicators of educational achievement, such as dropout, college enrollment, and college graduation rates, Chinese-Americans as a group have indeed fared well, even outdoing Whites (Hsia, 1988, pp. 13-14). Aggregate data, however, can be misleading. The diversity in country of origin, language, socioeconomic status, educational background, and degree of acculturation makes it extremely difficult to generalize about the contemporary community. As pointed out by Kwong (1987), the contemporary Chinese-American community has become a bimodal community of "Uptown Chinese" and "Downtown Chinese". Roughly 30% of Chinese-Americans, both American-born and immigrants, are professionals and entrepreneurs, well-educated, enjoying high incomes, and living outside of Chinatowns. Another 30% are manual-labor and service workers, more recent immigrants, speaking no English, having little education, and residing in Chinatowns. The bimodal distribution should be remembered when considering educational achievement and parent involvement, or anything else, of Chinese-Americans.

Many explanations are offered for Chinese-Americans' success in school. The most commonly embraced credits cultural values and traditions; virtually every article discussing Chinese-American school success includes some reference to Chinese cultural values. Values usually refer to those based on Confucianism and encompassing the following: respect for one's elders, a sense of family obligation, deferred gratification, hard work and discipline, and reverence for learning. The thesis assumes: (1) Chinese immigrants bring a cultural respect for learning; (2) hierarchical and closely-knit family structures encourage children to work hard in school and make parental monitoring of child's homework and whereabouts much easier; and (3) the parent-child relationship is congruent with the teacher-pupil relationship in the public school, so that behaviors

socialized at home are valued by the teacher.

There is, of course, some truth in all this. The cultural thesis has limitations because it does not account for the generally low educational level of Chinese-Americans in an earlier period of their history in the United States.

As pointed out by a number of scholars who study Asian-American educational achievement (e.g. Suzuki, 1977; 1988; Hirschman & Wong, 1986; Park, 1990; Sue & Okazaki, 1990; and Ogbu, 1983, 1990), one must examine larger structural factors which may constrain or expand the range of options for individual families. Thus, an analysis of Chinese-American educational achievement must take into account the role of the following factors: (1) events and traditions in the homeland, which illuminate the roots of those cultural values and practices that are conducive to school success; and (2) history of the Chinese community in the U.S. and its interactions with mainstream American society. That interaction shapes how Chinese-American families define the social reality for their offspring, the values they emphasize, and the practices they adopt. It is the nature of the status mobility system and opportunity structure interacting with parental values and practices which offers a clue to disparities in the school performance of Chinese-Americans at various points in history.

Ultimately, though, each individual Chinese-American family develops its own cultural identity and accompanying world view. We suspect that the family's perception of their own roots as well as of American "soil" has a significant influence on how they socialize their children and their approach to education. There is some indication (e.g. Yee, 1983) that most helpful to a Chinese-American child's general adaptation would be the parent's ability to combine a stable sense of cultural identity with a simultaneous openness to American culture. Whether this applies also to the child's school success is a question that our study will hopefully shed light on.

## Methodology

Entry into Schools. Our design confined our selection of research subjects to children who were recommended to the project by White teachers in public schools in a metropolitan area in New England. During the first year of data collection, five Chinese-American families were recruited from a single school in the city, which we will call "Midtown School". In the second year, two more families from the same school were added to the sample. We obtained approval without difficulty from the central school administration, the principal, and the teachers. In fact, the principal was particularly supportive. He chose to introduce the study to the parents via a personal phone call, briefed the teachers, and found substitute teachers so teachers can be

released for meetings with the researcher.

Obtaining approval from the suburban school system followed a different procedure. The central school administration required a formal research proposal before releasing statistics on racial breakdowns of student enrollment in the various schools. Because there are very few Chinese-American kindergarten pupils in most suburban schools, it took many contacts with principals and teachers to identify several potentially successful Chinese-American children.

Identification of Children. We excluded children who are enrolled in bilingual classrooms or who participate in ESL programs to avoid introducing confounding variables of English proficiency. In Midtown School, each of the two kindergarten teachers was asked to review the class roster and identify the children she considered as successful or potentially successful. She could name as few or as many as she wanted. (In this particular school, almost all the Asian-American students are of Chinese descent, so teachers were able to identify the ethnicity of the child.) As noted, the principal, who is Chinese-American, contacted all parents by telephone, briefly described the study, and encouraged the parents to participate. Nine families were approached last year and this year; there were only two refusals.

In the suburban school, hereafter called the Meadow School, the kindergarten teacher recommended two Chinese-American families whose children show potential for school success. The principal authorized the researcher to contact the parents directly by letter and then by telephone. Both sets of parents agreed to participate.

Data Collection Methods. An interview guide with open-ended questions was developed to explore teachers' definition of success, their expectations of children as they enter and leave kindergarten or first grade, their perspectives of school culture, and their notion of home-school partnership. Information on the family was gathered through several means, including a brief background information questionnaire; open-ended interviews; and researcher observations of parent-child interactions in the home, the car, or on field trips. The interviews explore how parents see their child, their definition of success, their concept of their community, how they interpret their role in helping the child succeed in school, their interactions with the school, and the family history of immigration to the U.S. The length of each visit ranged from one hour to four hours.

Given young children's attention span, interviews with the children were short and informal, relying heavily on playing games, drawing pictures, and looking over family photo albums. To explore children's feelings about school, the teacher, being

Chinese-American, and being a boy or a girl, the researcher supplemented interviews with an activity. Color photographs of children with different facial expressions (such as happy, sad, mad, confused, shocked, ashamed) were shown and the child was asked to pick a picture matching how he or she feels. Photographs showing a classroom of only Asian-looking children and a classroom of children from different racial backgrounds were used to stimulate a conversation about the child's racial identity and reference group. We always asked the child to write his or her Chinese name if the child knew how to, to read a book of the child's choice, and to draw a picture of the family. Of course, the amount of data gathered varied depending on each child's sociability and ability to concentrate.

Date collection also included classroom observation. The five children recruited in the first cohort have been observed at least four times, focusing on each child's interactions with the teacher and other adults, and the peers in class and during recess, as well as on skills and abilities exhibited in the classroom.

The school records of each of the five children were reviewed for additional data, but the value was limited. The most useful information was on attendance and the child's medical history. Once the children were in first grade, school report cards became available and provided additional data on the child's performance, strengths, and weaknesses.

All interviews were taped and transcribed. Data analysis requires the coding of all data. Consistent with a qualitative methodology (Miles & Huberman, 1984), codes developed as data were reviewed several times. Once codes were developed, recurrent themes were examined for each case as well as across cases.

**Description of the Sample**

The following statistics apply:

- All the children in the sample were born in the U.S.
- There are five boys and four girls.
- Six of the nine children have siblings.
- All children come from "intact" families with two parents.
- Only two mothers do not work outside of the home.
- Three children have at least one grandparent living in the home while a fourth child spends a significant amount of time before and after school every day in his grandfather's house.
- Parental education level ranges from sixth grade to Ph.D. In four families, both parents are college graduates.
- Parental occupations also vary, ranging from restaurant worker to corporation lawyer.

We considered it too intrusive to ask family's income; despite the limitations of using participation in free or reduced school lunch program as a criterion, we decided to use this as a rough estimate of socioeconomic level. Only two families could be classified as low-income.

Of the 18 parents, only three are not U.S. citizens. Two children in the sample have at least one American-born parent. The remaining seven have immigrant parents, who came at various stages in their lives to the U.S. from China, Macau, or Hong Kong. While some parents immigrated as teenagers, others arrived as adults following marriage. The length of their residence in the country ranges from 6 to 30 years.

In our sample, the primary language used at home is Cantonese in six families, Mandarin in one family, and English in two families. The researcher uses the primary home language to conduct parent and grandparent interviews. Most interviews with the children are conducted in English or a combination of English and Chinese.

**Ivan Chan: Profile of a Chinese-American Family**

The rest of this paper portrays how a working class, immigrant, Chinese-American family prepares their only child to succeed in school. We chose this family at this time because the researcher has had the most extensive and varied contacts with this family, and thus has accumulated the most data. Furthermore, this family makes for a fascinating study because, without even being aware of the criteria for school success used by different teachers, the family has managed to socialize their son to be sociable, talkative, and curious (qualities valued by the kindergarten teacher) and compliant, attentive, and polite (qualities valued by the first grade teacher).

The drawback of presenting one case is limited applicability. The Chan family cannot be considered representative of the small sample, let alone Chinese-American families in general. Some of themes and subthemes reported about the Chan family, however, are also seen in the other immigrant families in the sample. Focusing on one case may also provide insight into the complex process of family support for school success. We are looking for more than a laundry list of activities the family engages in, but rather the world view that drives and explains these actions.

<u>Contacts with the Family.</u> There have been six contacts with the Chan family, totalling 15 hours. The researcher has talked to the child, the mother, the father, and the grandmother in various settings: the home, a natural history museum, and a restaurant. Ivan was observed in the classroom five times, twice in kindergarten and three times in first grade. Two interviews were conducted with his kindergarten teacher and two with his

first grade teacher.

Description of the Child. Ivan turned seven in March, 1993. His name is formed from two characters meaning "happy" and "distinguished" or "prosperous". However, he is not called by his Chinese name at home or school. Ivan is bilingual.

At present Ivan is a first-grader in the Midtown School, which has a diverse student body: 50% Asian-American (predominantly Chinese), 30% African-American, and 20% Caucasian. Both his teachers are Caucasians.

Ivan is a well-built boy who is bigger than most Asian-American children in his class. His kindergarten teacher describes him as being very bright, aware of what is going on in the classroom, ready for a daily challenge. He is eager to be the first to try everything (open-ended or structured), and has excellent social skills. He no problem playing with others and stands up for himself without bullying others. The teacher says of his social skills, "If any kid plays with Ivan, I just know the other kid will have a wonderful and successful time with him."

Interestingly, the first grade teacher also considers Ivan a successful student, but for different reasons. She describes Ivan as a very serious child, very conscientious. He has some problems with reading and is just starting to get a good grasp of phonics. His handwriting is very good. What the first grade teacher appreciates most in Ivan is his good behavior. Observation in the classroom confirms that Ivan is very well-behaved and attentive, raises his hand before speaking, and is always the first in class to sit up "nice and tall" when the teacher does a conduct check or to stand in line to return from recess. He is often cited by the first grade teacher as a model for classroom behavior. During recess, however, Ivan is as active as other kids and enjoys the free time outside.

Ivan's mother and grandmother describe him as curious, talkative, easy-going, obedient, and kind-hearted. As Mrs. Chan relates, "Ivan is a compliant kid. If you tell him not to do something because you don't like it, then he would not do it. In that sense he is an easy child to raise." The researcher has found Ivan to be inquisitive, eager to learn, pleasant, poised, polite, mature for his age, and able to initiate social interactions with adults.

Child's Schooling History. From age two months to 5, Ivan attended a full-day child care center, which served a predominantly White and Hispanic population. He was the first Chinese-American child to enroll in this center. From an early age he was exposed to English and Spanish. He attended Kindergarten 1 in a Boston public school for two months while being on the waiting list for the Midtown School, which was the

parents' first choice. He has been a student of Midtown School since March, 1991.

Family Composition and Background. Ivan is an only child of immigrant parents. Both parents have become U.S. citizens. Mr. Chan, 41 years old, has lived in the U.S. for 13 years. He was born in Chiaozhou, China and finished high school. He is working as a waiter in a Chinese restaurant located in a suburb of Boston, with working hours from 2 p.m. to midnight every day except Monday. Mrs. Chan, age 36, has lived in the U.S. for nine years. She was also born in China but lived and worked in Hong Kong for several years as a bookkeeper while attending business school classes. At present she holds an accountant position in a private firm that manages medical research grants for hospitals. She is taking college-level courses to improve her skills in English and computers.

More than a year ago Mrs. Chan's mother came from Hong Kong to live with them. She is probably in her early 60's. Healthy and energetic, she not only takes care of Ivan after he is home from school, but also cleans house and cooks all the meals. Mrs. Chan has extended family members in Hong Kong, Toronto, California, Australia, and Mainland China.

Language. Cantonese is the primary language spoken in the home although the father's native tongue is actually the Chiaozhou dialect. Mrs. Chan is able to read, write, and speak English but her spoken English has a heavy accent and she sometimes mispronounces words. Mr. Chan's English is sufficient to take orders from customers in a restaurant although he admits he has trouble understanding documents written in English. The grandmother's English is minimal. She knows the English alphabet but has trouble answering the telephone if the caller speaks English.

The Family's Home and Neighborhood. The Chans own a two-bedroom unit in a duplex in a racially mixed urban neighborhood away from Chinatown. Ivan shares a bedroom with his grandmother. His toys are kept in the basement while his crayons, markers, papers, and worksheets are kept in the living room. One corner of the living room, right next to the television set, serves as his study corner.

Child's Interests and Routine. Ivan has a simple schedule. His grandmother waits with him in the morning at the school bus stop at the street corner and meets him in the same place in the afternoon. His father may take Ivan to school on his day off. After returning home at 3:45 p.m., Ivan is expected to sit down at a child-size desk to do homework, which takes 10-15 minutes. There are two kinds of homework: that sent home by the teacher and extra work assigned by Mrs. Chan. After finishing his homework, Ivan can eat snack and watch television. He can choose his programs; he likes to watch cartoons and programs about

nature. Sometimes he does activity books and listens to audiocassettes; he also plays with his dog. He is not permitted to go outside to play with children in the neighborhood or visit school friends in their homes.

Ivan has no household chores. When Mrs. Chan comes from around 6 or 7 p.m. she checks Ivan's work and asks Ivan to make corrections. After supper, the grandmother watches Cantonese television programs beamed from Los Angeles. Ivan sometimes watches these Chinese programs, too, especially Chinese martial arts movies. His bedtime is about 9 p.m.

On Saturdays and Sundays, Ivan may go shopping with his mother and grandmother and eat at a Chinatown teahouse. His mother also assigns homework for Ivan on Saturdays. When homework is done, he is allowed to play Nintendo electronic games. Sunday is his most free day because there is no homework and he can watch more television and play Nintendo. Due to Mr. Chan's working hours, Ivan never sees his father Tuesdays through Fridays.

Ivan is interested in many of the toys with which boys of his age play, such as Transformers, Ninja Turtles, Gameboy and Nintendo electronic games, and computer games. His hero is Batman. He also enjoys swimming, dancing, drawing, and constructing things from blocks. Ivan has often declared his wish to become a scientist/explorer when he grows up. He is very interested in reading about animals and looking at animal pictures or exhibits.

Two features of Ivan's life should be noted: the lack of organized, structured after-school activities and the lack of peer interactions outside of school. Other than in school, Ivan moves primarily in an Chinese adult world, mostly of family members.

Parental Expectations of the Child. Mrs. Chan wants Ivan to grow up to be self-reliant, considerate, and financially secure. Financial security is associated with a college education and a high status occupation. Mrs. Chan says, "I want him to be something; if he gets into good schools like MIT or Harvard, I am willing to borrow money and do anything to pay the tuition. I have only one child, so I would provide for his education as much as I can. He can go for his Ph.D. if he is able. I would do my best." Mr. Chan also wants Ivan to go to college, but is less specific about what colleges he should attend. Although neither parent specifies a future occupation for Ivan, it is clear that he is expected to be a professional. "He can be a doctor, engineer, computer scientist, or researcher, depending on his interests and abilities," says the mother. When asked about elected office such as congressman, senator, or president, Mrs. Chan laughed and said this has not even crossed her mind. In the Chinese culture, politicians do not command the respect that

doctors and scientists do.

The parents have high expectations for Ivan's academic performance. Mrs. Chan is not easily satisfied by the report card or teachers' glowing comments on worksheets. "I am stricter than the teacher. I don't say everything is wonderful and good." In first grade, Mrs. Chan expects Ivan not only to get things right, but also to write neatly. She scrutinizes his report cards and carefully notes the areas where Ivan has shown improvement and where he has regressed.

Is Ivan aware of these parental expectations? No question. When the researcher asked him, "What would make Mommy happy?" he replied without any hesitation, "Get all A's in school." Interestingly, when asked what would make his first grade teacher happy, he replied, "Sit still and be quiet and don't talk when she is talking." By the second semester of first grade, Ivan has begun to compare his situation with that of others, asking other children in class if they have extra homework assigned by mothers.

## Theme 1: Developing Bicultural Competency

Racial minority parents in the U.S. usually seek to socialize their children to function in two worlds: mainstream society and the ethnic community. Thus activities and attitudes that support a child's school success must be considered in context of the family's view of their roots in U.S. soil and their status in American society. According to Wang (1991), there are at least five types of Chinese-American identity: sojourner, assimilator, accommodator, the ethnically proud, and the uprooted. The Chans do not exhibit a sojourner identity, which has been hypothesized to have a link to academic achievement (Ogbu, 1983). They have no wish to return to China and they do not compare their lot with people remaining in China or Hong Kong. They are "accommodators" (Wang, 1991), setting roots in America but not wishing to turn their backs on Chinese culture. They see their American-born son as having the right to compete with others (both Chinese and non-Chinese) for a place in American society. While maintaining a distinctively Chinese home, the Chans, especially the mother, are open to outside influences. Their main concern is to equip Ivan to be competent in the mainstream environment, i.e., being able to speak English fluently, feeling comfortable in the presence of Americans of all races, and being confident.

How is this task accomplished? The family surrounds the child with a very Chinese environment at home yet they ensure his exposure to American society as well. The adults speak Chinese to the child, eat Chinese style meals at home, watch Chinese television programs, listen to Chinese radio broadcasts, and read Chinese newspapers. The wall calendars feature pictures of Hong Kong movie stars and singers. Traditional Chinese New Year

decorations are put up and special pastries cooked for the celebration. When the parents go visiting with Ivan, it is to the homes of other Chinese (either friends or extended family members).

Sending Ivan to Chinese language school is not considered important to the family, however. As Mrs. Chan says, "My husband's English is problematic and mine isn't so great either. I want Ivan to learn English well. In the U.S. you have to deal with English everywhere. It is good enough for Ivan to understand and speak Chinese so that he can communicate with the grandparents. But he doesn't need to learn to read and write Chinese, or he can wait to learn these later. Since Ivan was born here, I would rather that he has a good foundation in English, even though I don't get much support for this idea from my friends." Mr. Chan, who laments his limited English, shares his wife's view: "We speak Chinese at home, but at school they should speak English. Chinese is not important, because this is an American society. I would like Ivan to react more quickly in English."

The parents have also taken great pains to ensure that from an early age Ivan has an opportunity to interact with people from other races. For example, the parents made a choice to enroll Ivan in a day care center outside Chinatown, the rationale being "I want him to mingle with non-Chinese children to learn their ways." Although the family certainly uses community resources in Chinatown such as the school, grocery stores, restaurants, etc., a conscious effort has been made to take Ivan beyond the Chinatown community. When exploring after-school art classes, for example, the parents ruled out art classes offered in Chinatown, preferring instead classes offered by the city's art museum. Commenting on the summer program Ivan was enrolled in after kindergarten, Mrs. Chan said, "unfortunately, all the kids in the summer program are Chinese kids. (emphasis added)"

One could misinterpret comments and actions like these as parental rejection of their own culture and people, but as pointed out earlier, evidence of maintaining Chinese culture in the home abounds. Based on their own experiences, the parents believe that success in mainstream society depends on acquiring the right tools (English language, social poise, confidence in dealing with diverse people).

In the Chan family, the person "masterminding" Ivan's socialization is the mother. She is quite articulate in stating her intention of taking the best of Western parenting and mixing it with the best of Chinese parenting. The following excerpts from an interview with Mrs. Chan are instructive:

"Many of the lo-fan [a generic term literally meaning 'old foreigners', particularly Caucasians or Westerners] I work with are extremely interesting to talk to and they are highly

educated. To me, my job is not just for getting a paycheck, but it helps me to learn about American society, practicing English, and knowing more about a foreign culture, even if it doesn't mean following all the American ways. I think there is something very good about how the lo-fans raise their kids--they pay attention, listen to their kids, and are patient. They won't tell their kids, 'Don't bother me' and they try to answer questions. The lo-fan children are not like us in the old days, you know, not having communication with our parents. So I try to be a better parent. I don't dismiss Ivan's questions and I tell my mother not to stifle Ivan's inquisitiveness. If Ivan doesn't ask questions, how is he to learn? On the other hand, I don't like unruly children. You can't be too lax."

On another occasion, Mrs. Chan says, "Although my husband and I were not born here, Ivan was, and he is growing up here in the U.S. He will be settled here, so he should be more Americanized. We will of course pass on the positive Chinese traditions, but I would not follow all the traditions completely anyway."

Mrs. Chan sees herself as more Chinese than American, but she considers herself as a Westernized Chinese. For example, she talks about accepting interracial marriage if Ivan so chooses and not insisting on living with Ivan when she is old. How does Ivan see himself? The following dialogue gives some indication:

Researcher: If someone asks you, are you Chinese? Are you American? How would you answer?
Ivan: I would say I come from here, I am Chinese.
Researcher: Would you ever reply, I am not Chinese, I am American?
Ivan: Never.

Based on data from the activity involving choice of facial expressions in photographs, Ivan seems happy about being Chinese, but dislikes Chinatown because "it is dirty". When asked what is good about being Chinese, he replied. "I can get to know Chinese people." One may conclude that Ivan, like his parents, has a strong Chinese identity, but he is aware that unlike his parents, he is not an immigrant; he is "from here". His best friends include both Chinese and non-Chinese.

Surprisingly, racial prejudice or discrimination is seldom discussed in this family. Parents and grandmother could not cite examples of their personal encounters with prejudice or discrimination. The world being presented to Ivan is one of almost unlimited opportunities for American-born Chinese, though not for immigrants. Without mentioning racism explicitly, the parents and grandmother have nevertheless suggested indirectly that Ivan has to work harder than others because he is a person of Chinese descent.

## Theme 2: Family Effort and Planning to Enhance School Success

Confucianism promotes a belief in human malleability (Chen & Uttal, 1988) and Chinese parents tend to attribute achievement more to effort than to innate ability, as compared to their American counterparts (e.g. Ho, 1986; Lin, 1988; Chen & Uttal, 1988; Schneider & Lee, 1990). Although Mrs. Chan thinks that effort and innate ability contribute equally to a child's success in school, she believes strongly that good things do not happen by chance, that persistent efforts and long-term planning are necessary and will pay off. This belief guides how she prepares Ivan for success in school.

Chinese-Americans are often stereotyped as passive. The data on Ivan's family reveals nothing passive about how the family prepares for Ivan's future success. Mrs. Chan in particular is assertive and resourceful. When seven months pregnant, having decided she would not hire an older Chinese woman to babysit because it would hinder Ivan in the future, she put Ivan on the waiting list of a day care center serving Anglo and Hispanic children. She thought: "If I send him to a Lo-Fan day care, he can learn their ways and have an easier time adjusting to school later on. He won't have to be in a bilingual program and start from square one." A month before Ivan was born, Mrs. Chan made a follow-up call. An opening was available, and Ivan enrolled at two months of age.

While Ivan was still in preschool, Mrs. Chan explored private, non-sectarian schools and parochial schools by asking friends and co-workers. Later, while Ivan was attending one school and on the waiting list for the Midtown School, the Chans' first choice, Mrs. Chan urged her husband to keep calling the North Zone Parent Information Center about Ivan's position in the waiting list.

There are other examples of the parents' goal-directedness. Mrs. Chan asked the principal to place Ivan in a first grade class with a good, strict teacher. Concerned about his son's ability to compete academically, Mr. Chan asked the researcher if he should get a tutor for Ivan. Cognizant of the high costs of a college education, Mrs. Chan said she has even considered working for a college so that Ivan could receive a tuition waiver in the future. Since age three or four, Mrs. Chan has been teaching him the "3-R's" and encouraging good study habits that she hopes will serve him well in high school and beyond.

According to Trueba, Cheng, & Ima (1993, p. 91), parents can enhance their child's school success in three ways: (1) parental knowledge of access to resources; (2) home teaching and literacy activities undertaken by family members or tutors; and (3) auxiliary learning which includes extracurricular activities, such as music, dance, acting lessons, sports, and travel.

Parental knowledge of access to resources. In the Chan family, the mother plays the primary role in promoting literacy activities and interpreting the outside world to Ivan. As the most English proficient adult in the family, Mrs. Chan assumes the responsibility of securing knowledge of access to resources. Although she utilizes the official parent information center provided by the city's public school system, she relies heavily on informal networks, seeking information from other Chinese parents in the Midtown School about summer camps, the teaching styles of specific teachers in the school, how to win admission to prestigious exam schools. Because of her workplace's research orientation, Mrs. Chan's co-workers tend to be highly educated people, from whom she finds out, for example, about college entrance requirements, special teachers' bookstores that sell workbooks and flashcards, and which computer to buy.

Mrs. Chan also actively seeks information about academic work and enrichment activities from Ivan's teachers and even from the researcher. Mrs. Chan says, "I don't exactly sit down with friends to exchange ideas about education or childrearing, but I keep my ears open, and I watch Lo-Fans to see how they interact with their children. As for Ivan's teacher, I would ask for suggestions because she is more experienced and she even spends more hours with my son than I do."

Home teaching and literacy activities. Considerable effort, time, and money are invested in home teaching and literacy activities. As Mrs. Chan puts it, "Education is like a business. If you don't invest now, there is no return in the future." The whole family is involved, although the father's work schedule makes it difficult for him to be involved directly. (He supports his wife's decisions and practices and reminds Ivan to study. He also monitors Ivan's progress in English conversation.) The major literacy activity in the home is homework, not just work sent home by the teacher, but work designed mostly by Ivan's mother. The grandmother monitors Ivan while he does his homework and his mother checks his work nightly. The night before a test in school, Mrs. Chan will review with Ivan the material to be tested. Mrs. Chan also decides how to punish and reward the child. Extra homework consists almost exclusively of worksheets, either copying words or solving simple math problems. Sometimes Mrs. Chan will practice conversing in English with Ivan. Reading is encouraged in a general way, but there are no designated number of books or pages to read every day.

The family creates additional homework for several reasons. One is to compensate for a perceived laxity on the part of the school. There simply is not enough work to occupy the child, and he ends up having only play time at home. Observation of Ivan's "homework time" and interviews with Ivan's mother and grandmother reveal that homework is not simply to practice a skill acquired in school (although they firmly believe that

practice makes perfect). They feel that having a young child sit at a desk and work for a short time every day develops good study habits and a sense of obligation. Mrs. Chan explains, "Getting everything correct is not as important as getting used to sitting down at a desk right after school. I want him to learn that his responsibility is to study, just like mommy, daddy, and grandma have their respective responsibilities. I want him to be like school children in Hong Kong, who have the habit of completing their homework before doing other things. Five or ten minutes of homework is not very long, but once he is used to the idea, he could sit down for a longer period of time as he grows older. I know when he goes to high school, he will have tons of work...I am afraid he couldn't keep up if he is too lax now. Children, when given a choice, will play and watch TV all day. It is the adult who has to lay down the rules, and if this were done early the child will learn to accept them."

Another function of parent-assigned homework is to make the child feel well-prepared and knowledgeable, which helps his self-esteem. Mrs. Chan has taught numbers, alphabets, and simple math ahead of the school's schedule. "Instead of being bored in school, I think Ivan feels very proud of himself. What the teacher is teaching, he already knows, and people think he is smart," Mrs. Chan clarifies.

As Ivan moved from kindergarten to first grade, accuracy of work within a certain time frame became more important because "I want Ivan to do his work accurately and not too slowly. He shouldn't be too casual about it and he shouldn't drag it out. Well, when there is a test in class, and other people have finished, you don't want him to be in the situation of getting everything right but not having time to answer all the questions on the test. So I am thinking of the many tests and exams he will be taking in the future."

Mrs. Chan also attempts to give a rationale to Ivan for family-assigned homework: "Mommy gives you extra homework because I want you to be smart and to learn more things. Otherwise, it will be hard for you to keep up in the future."

It is interesting that Mrs. Chan, while demanding that Ivan view homework as his responsibility, considers her own role quite significant. When Ivan's grade slipped slightly in certain subjects, Mrs. Chan remarked, "I can't be too harsh on him because I am partly to blame. With the reorganization at my firm, I have been too busy to check his homework on a daily basis or make him re-do shoddy work." Thus school work is seen as a partnership between parent and child.

Auxiliary Learning. One would expect a goal-oriented mother like Mrs. Chan to enroll Ivan in after-school lessons and organized weekend activities. It is rather puzzling that these have not become part of the Chan family's plan for preparing Ivan

for school success. Mrs. Chan espouses her view on extracurricular activities: "Children have their limits; you can't push them beyond the limits. You shouldn't overprogram them with activities. If a kindergarten child or even first grade child has weekend lessons in piano, art, and the Chinese language, it is too much. The child can't absorb it all. Yes, I am against young children taking a lot of different lessons. To me, school work is the most important. Eventually Ivan may take up some after-school activity, but he should concentrate on one thing. What it is depends on what Ivan enjoys although I would really like him to take up some sport activity because he is kind of chubby."

Ivan's only after-school program was an 8-week parent-child computer class offered at the Midtown School, in which both Ivan and Mrs. Chan learned how to use a computer. This did not involve many peer interactions.

There are other reasons why Ivan is not involved in structured after-school activities. The family has explored several programs, at Ivan's request, such as art classes and the Boys & Girls Club, but there seem to be several constraints. The Chans are reluctant to enroll Ivan in any program located in Chinatown but transportation arrangements are necessary for programs located elsewhere. Moreover, the Chans will not consider just <u>any</u> program; they must first conduct a thorough check of the behaviors of the children in that program. We are seeing here the family's attempt to balance structured auxiliary learning activities for Ivan with a desire to protect him from negative influences in larger society. On one hand, the family wants Ivan to interact with children from all races; on the other hand, interactions present a potential danger, because as Mrs. Chan puts it, "My biggest fear about childrearing is that Ivan would turn wild and "hok wai" (literally meaning "learn bad"). You know there are too many kids out there who are unruly, use bad language, etc. I just don't feel safe. I don't want people to tease Ivan or bother him. He is so straight-laced and goes by the book. Some children don't play by the rule and are quite mean and tough."

Ivan has had plenty of informal auxiliary learning opportunities, such as museum visits, going to the cinema, taking a local harbor cruise, and out-of-state travel. (He is a remarkably well-traveled youngster, having visited California, Toronto, Hong Kong, China, Mexico, and Australia. These trips, which combined sightseeing with visiting relatives, are considered safer because Ivan was with his own family.) Ivan has a good memory and a wonderful ability to connect what he has seen on various field trips in the past with what he is observing at present.

<u>Parent-Child Relationship as Motivator</u>. The reader may conjure up an image of Ivan's parents and grandmother as the

slave masters of an overburdened child being groomed for success. This does not appear to be the case. We are impressed with the comfortable and tension-free relationship between Ivan and his mother in particular. They seem to enjoy each other's company. Ivan is obviously the pride and joy of his parents and grandmother. He is hugged, patted on the head, and praised--not typical of traditional Chinese families. The favorite term used to praise him is "lec jai", which means "smart boy" and is used to compliment him not only for good grades, but for being independent, or for keeping a cool head when there is trouble, etc. At the same time, it is clear that adults set the limits and Ivan is expected to follow them. Ivan's close relationships with his mother and grandmother and, to a lesser extent, his father, make him eager to please them.

Lately Ivan has begun to ask why he has to be a good student. Mrs. Chan told her son recently: "It is for your own good. Look at your father. He doesn't speak English well so he has to work hard in the restaurant and can't spend much time with the family. You don't want to be like him. Look at me. I didn't have a chance to attend college when I was younger and now I have to do that to keep up. I speak English with an accent and that limits what I can do. I don't want you to suffer. I want you to be a good student, to have at least a college education." Everyone constantly reminds Ivan, "Your mother has put all her 'sum gay' [meaning attention, sweat, and effort] on you." The family likens the frequent repetition of this sentence to "nim ging" [literally meaning "reciting a scripture", roughly equivalent to "a broken record" in the American slang].

All adult members of the Chan family model for Ivan the need for ongoing learning. Mr. Chan has been taking ESL classes and works with a tutor; Mrs. Chan takes college classes for self-improvement and is learning a new software on her computer at home. Even Ivan's grandmother has taken ESL classes for a brief period of time; she asks Ivan and the researcher to help her with the pronunciation of certain English words. All the adults regularly read newspapers and Ivan sees his mother study for examinations. Mrs. Chan likes to look up things in the encyclopedia and from the field trip to the museum, the researcher could see that Mrs. Chan is inquisitive and likes to learn new things. Although this adult learning is not part of the "plan" and the family puts very little emphasis on this aspect in the interviews, the researcher suspects that this naturally occurring role modeling must make a positive contribution to Ian's view of education.

## Theme 3: Ambivalence Toward School and Teacher

According to Erickson (1987), the most influential factor in school success is the school's being perceived as legitimate by both parents and children. Chinese-Americans have a tradition of

according legitimacy to schools in their homeland. In the Confucian tradition, the teacher is revered; teachers are authority figures second only to parents. Both as "dispenser of knowledge" and as "molder of character" the teacher's role is an exalted one (Sung, 1987, p. 77).

The limited research available on Chinese-American parent involvement in education indicates minimal Chinese-American parent presence in the schools as volunteer assistants, advocates for their children, or participants in policy making (Yao, 1985; Ho & Fong, 1990; Siu, 1993). The Chan family is actually more involved with the school than many other Chinese-American parents. They contacted the kindergarten teacher for suggestions on home-teaching activities; made special requests to the principal; and attend class performances, Open House, and parent council meeting when their schedules permit. The Chans discuss the teachers in respectful language, even though they may not agree with everything she does.

Does this mean the Chan family trusts the school and teacher to enhance Ivan's school success? Not necessarily. In fact, the Chans are quite dissatisfied. Their concerns are similar to those found in other studies (e.g. Hirata, 1975; Ho & Fong, 1990): lax discipline, lack of moral education, poor mathematics training, and insufficient homework. Although most Chinese-American parents avoid complaining directly to the school and instead take compensatory strategies, Mrs. Chan has expressed some of her concerns to the teacher. Mrs. Chan recited the example of a substitute teacher Ivan had in kindergarten: "In some cases, the teacher seems afraid of reprimanding children who misbehave because they are scared the parents may sue them. One time, while the sub was telling a story, some children were allowed to fool around and pay no attention. One child even took the teacher's chair and walked around the room with the chair on his head! In Hong Kong, the teacher simply would not let the situation get out of hand like this. When I talked to the regular teacher, not the sub, she sounded helpless and said that many parents would not like it if teachers discipline the children too harshly."

The Chans have three choices: be activists and organize other parents to try to make changes; enroll Ivan in the bilingual program which has stricter discipline and assigns more homework; compensate for what they see is lacking in school. The Chans have chosen the third strategy. Even though the Midtown School has an excellent reputation locally and nationally, Mrs. Chan says, "I sometimes doubt it when I see the unruly behavior of some students there."

Rather than blaming specific teachers, Mrs. Chan sees her complaints as systemic issues. Yet she feels powerless to change them; serving on the parent council does not seem possible because of "my poor English and crazy schedule of job and

college classes."

Data gathered from interviews with Ivan's teachers indicate that while they feel positive about Ivan's family, may be aware of some of their concerns, they probably do not fully understand their ambivalence toward school.

**Summary**

The slang expression "Chinaman's chance", which means no chance at all, aptly describes the dire situation of the Chinese in this country during the height of the anti-Chinese movement, from late 19th century to early 20th century (Chen, 1981, pp. 127-193). Even with much improved access to education and employment, many contemporary Chinese-American families are still aware of the odds against achieving success in this society. Like other parents of color, the Chans are confronted with a formidable task: to "prepare their children to be successfully bicultural" but also "to help children learn to negotiate instances of racism without losing motivation or self-esteem" (Swap, 1993, p. 119). Leaving nothing to chance and not completely trusting the school, family members invest considerable energy, time, and money into this endeavor.

Ivan is definitely aware of his role in this endeavor. So far he has not yet shown any symptom of distress although he is beginning to question why he has to do more homework than his classmates. While his peers in school are from different races, his social circle outside of school is almost exclusively Chinese and adult. His ability to move relatively easily between the two environments indicates that he has achieved bicultural or multicultural competency, considered "the best, but also the most difficult solution" (Trueba, Cheng & Ima, 1993, p. 83).

If one looks at attendance at parent council meetings, serving as volunteers in the school, and voting in school elections, the Chans cannot be considered very active parents, but there is little question that they care deeply about their child's education.

Because our research is work in progress, we need to further explore several areas in future interviews with the Chan family. For example, why do the Chans feel the school cannot change the things they are upset about? In the socialization of the child, why is racial prejudice and discrimination given little overt emphasis? Could a wish to maintain Ivan's motivation and avoid discouraging him be the reason? Will Ivan continue to accept the limits and expectations placed on him? This profile of a Chinese-American immigrant family raises larger questions. How can the school utilize the community's informal network of information-sharing to reach out to Chinese-American parents? How much does the teacher understand what goes on in the home and

the role played by siblings and extended family members in supporting school success? Are Chinese-American families and teachers working at cross purposes or in a genuine partnership?

The three major themes discussed in this paper need to be examined further in relation to other Chinese-American families in the sample. How these themes illustrated by the Chan family are played out in families with American-born parents will be of great interest to researchers concerned with the influences of acculturation and types of cultural identity. Hypotheses generated from a later phase of data analysis will eventually be tested with a larger Chinese-American population.

**REFERENCES**


Chen, C. & Uttal, D.H. (1988). Cultural values, parents' beliefs, and children's achievement in the United States and China. Human Development, 31, 351-358.

Chen, J. (1981). The Chinese of America. San Francisco: Harper & Row.

Davies, D. (1990). Schools Reaching Out: Family, school, and community partnerships for school success. Phi Delta Kappan, 72(5), 376-382.

Dornbusch, S.M. & Wood, K.D. (1989). Family processes and educational achievement. In W. Weston (Ed.) Education and the American family: A research synthesis (pp. 66-95). New York: New York University Press.

Epstein, J. (1987). Parent involvement: What research says to administrators. Education and Urban Society, 19(2), 119-136.

Erickson, F. (1987). Transformation and school success: The politics and culture of educational achievement. Anthropology and Education Quarterly, 18(4), 335-356.

Hidalgo, N. (1992). "i saw puerto rico once": A review of the literature on Puerto Rican families in the United States. Boston: Center on Families, Communities, Schools, and Children's Learning.

Hirata, L.C. (1975, October). Youth, parents, and teachers in Chinatown: A triadic framework on minority socialization. Urban Education, 10(3), 279-296.

Hirschman, C. & Wong, M.G. (1986, September). The extraordinary educational attainment of Asian-Americans: A search for historical evidence and explanations. Social Forces, 65(1),1-27.

Ho, D.Y.F. (1986). Chinese patterns of socialization: A critical

review. In M.H. Bond (Ed.) The Psychology of the Chinese people (pp.1-36). Hong Kong: Oxford University Press.

Ho, K. & Fong, M. (1990, September). A cool response to school activities; a hiding of dissatisfaction deep in the heart. Special issue on Chinese-American parent involvement. Herald, 3(9), 1. Published in New York City. Original in Chinese.

Hsia, J. (1988). Asian Americans in higher education and at work. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Kwong, P. (1987). The new chinatown. New York: Hill & Wang.

Lin, C.-Y. C. (1988). A comparison of childrearing practices among Chinese, Chinese-American, and Non-Asian American parents. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.

Miles, M. & Huberman, A. (1984). Qualitative data analysis. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications.

Ogbu, J. (1983, June). Minority status and schooling in plural societies. Comparative Education Review, 27(2), 168-190.

Ogbu, J. (1990). Overcoming racial barriers to equal access. In Goodlad, J. (Ed.) Access to knowledge: An agenda for our nation's schools (pp. 59-89). Princeton, N.J.: The College Entrance Examination Board.

Park, H. (1990). Interpreting the high educational achievement and socioeconomic status of Asian Americans. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Harvard University.

Perry, T. (1992). The search for a theoretical perspective on African American school achievement (first draft). Boston: Center on Families, Communities, Schools, and Children's Learning.

Schneider, B. & Lee, Y. (1990, December). A model for academic success: The school and home environment of East Asian students. Anthropology and Education Quarterly, 21(4), 358-377.

Siu, S.-F. (1992). Toward an understanding of Chinese-American educational achievement: A literature review. Boston: Center on Families, Communities, Schools, and Children's Learning.

Siu, S.-F. (1993). Research on Chinese-American families, schools, and community partnerships. To appear in J. Banks (Ed.) A handbook on research in multicultural education. New York: Macmillan.

Sue, S. & Okazaki, S. (1990). Asian-American educational achievement: A phenomenon in search of an explanation. American

Psychologist, 45(8), 913-920.

Sung, B.L. (1987). The adjustment experience of Chinese immigrant children in New York City. New York: Center for Migration Studies.

Suzuki, B.H. (1977). Education and the socialization of Asian Americans: A revisionist analysis of the 'model minority' thesis. Amerasia Journal, 4(2), 23-51.

Swap, S. & Krasnow, J. (1992). A saga of Irish-American achievement: Constructing a positive identity. Boston: Center on Families, Communities, Schools, and Children's Learning.

Swap, S. M. (1993). Developing home school partnerships: From concept to practice. New York: Columbia University Teachers College Press.

Trueba, H.T., Cheng, L.R.L., & Ima, K. (1993). Myth or reality: Adaptive strategies of Asian Americans in California. Washington, D.C.: Falmer Press.

Wang, L.L.-C. (1991). Roots and changing identity of the Chinese in the United States. Daedalus, 120(2), 181-206.

Yao, E.L. (1985). A comparison of family characteristics of Asian American and Anglo-American high achievers. International Journal of Comparative Sociology, 26(3-4), 198-207.

Yee, J.H.Y. (1983). Social competence in the Chinese-American child, parenting attitudes and acculturation. Ph.D. dissertation, Boston University.